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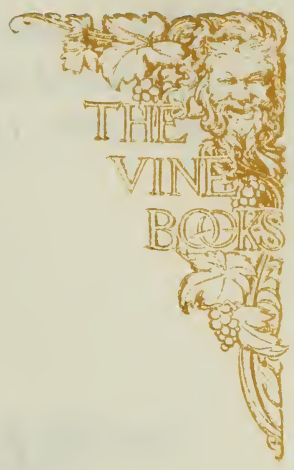
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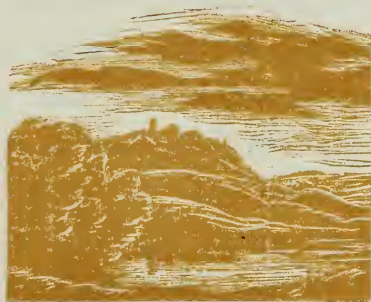
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Walter de la Mare

LISPET, LISPETT & VÂINE

LISPET, LISPETT AND VAINÉ

by
Walter de la Mare



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AUNDERS'S little clear morning town was busy with dogs and tradesmen and carriages. It wore an almost child-like vivacity and brightness, as if overnight it had been swept and garnished for entranceable visitors from over the seas. And there—in the blowy sunshine, like some grotesque Staffordshire figure on a garret chimneypiece—there, at the street corner, sat so ludicrous an old man that one might almost have described him as mediæval.

A peak cap, of a slightly marine appearance, was drawn down over his eyes. Beneath it, wisps of grey hair and a thin beard helplessly shook in the wind; and before him stood a gaping wallet, of cracked American cloth, held yawningly open by its scissor-legs.

From this receptacle, ever and again, he extracted a strand of his dyed bast, or dubiously rummaged in its depths for his scissors. Where-

upon he would gingerly draw the strand between his lips—a movement that positively set one's teeth on edge—and at the same moment he would cast a bleared, long, casual glance first down the street to his right—High Street; and then up the street to his left—Mortimer Street; as the bast drew him round.

I had watched him awhile from under the canvas window-blind of Lister Owlett's, the Curio Shop, in which my friend Maunders was chaffering with a dark sardonic-looking man over a piece of "Sheffield plate"; and, at last, with that peculiar mixture of shame, compassion amusement, and horror which such ineffectual (though possibly not unhappy) beings produce on one, I had crossed the road and had purchased an absurd little doll bast marketing basket. Oddly, too, *after* I had actually selected my specimen, and had even paid its price, the queer remote old creature had insisted on my taking a rather more ornate example of his wares . . .

"You know, Maunders," I said, when we were a hundred yards or so beyond the old

gentleman's pitch, "this thing isn't at all badly made. The pattern is rather pretty, and there's a kind of useless finish to it. There's still something to be said for the amateur. Anyhow, Bettie will like it."

"Maunder's turned that long large palish face of his, and looked at me with his extraordinary eyes. For the ninety-ninth time at least I noticed that their faint blue and his necktie's azure called each to each, as deep calls to deep.

"Amateur," he echoed blandly, though a peculiar fixity of attention had gathered into his gaze; "Why that old gentleman is the last of—the Lispets." He turned his head away—a queer-shaped, heavy head—and added: "Quite the last."

"Lispets, Maunder's; what are they?"

"My dear K, believe me," said Maunder's almost mincingly, "not everything is a jest. You must now have trodden the streets of this small town at least a dozen times. The Works—what remains of them—are not seven miles off. And yet, here you are, pleasantly fluting that you have lived a life of such obscurity as never to

have heard of Lispet, Lispett & Vaine. It's an affectation. I can scarcely forgive you. Nor will Henrietta."

He was—as usual—gently thrusting out before him his handsome malacca cane in a manner which frequently persuaded approaching pedestrians that he was blind. And he repeated *sotto voce*, and as if out of an ocean of reflection, " 'Lispet, Lispett & Vaine; Mercers to Their Majesties . . .' I wish I could remember exactly how the old title went. In latter times, I mean."

"Who were 'their Majesties,' then?"

" 'Their Majesties' ?" said Maunders. "Oh, mere kings and queens. In the Firm's heyday they were, of course, the crowned heads of practically the whole barbaric globe. But what is history!—mummified fact; desiccated life; the irretrievable. You are merely one of the crowd who care not tuppence for such things. The present generation—with its Stores and Emporiums and Trusts and 'Combines'—is blind to the merest inkling of what the phrase Merchant Prince implies. We are not even conscious of irony in little Tommie Tucker's

Nation of Shopkeepers. Other times, better manners. The only entirely honest merchant of late years—so far as I have definitely heard—is bones in Shirley graveyard. Still the Lispet tradition was not one of mere honesty.”

“What then?” said I.

“Well, in the first place,” replied Maunders, sliding me a remote ruminative glance, “it rambles back almost to prehistoric times. You may hunt down the aboriginals of the Firm for yourself, if you feel so inclined. They appear to have been Phœnicians. Tyre, maybe, but I gather non-Semitic. Some remote B.C. glass-work in the Egyptian galleries of the British Museum bears their “mark”—two inverted V’s with a kind of P between. There are others—a cone ‘supported by’ two doves; a running hound, a crescent moon, and a hand—just a slim, ungrasping hand. Such marks have been discovered, they say, woven into mummylinen, into Syrian embroidery, Damascus silks, and tapestry from the Persian Gulf.

“The priestesses of Astaroth, according to Bateson, danced in gauze of L. L. & V.’s handi-

work. They exploited the true bombyx ages before Ptolemy; their gold thread gleamed on the Ark of the covenant; and it was fabric of their weaving in which the Queen of Sheba marvelled before Solomon. The shoes of his apes, sewn-in with seed pearls and splinters of amethyst were —. But what's the good of chattering on like this? I'm not," groaned Maunders with a muffled yawn; "I'm not a perambulating encyclopædia. Some old pantaloon of a German, long before Bateson, burrowed in true German fashion into the firm's past. You may go to bed with his book, if you like—this very night. And then of course there are one or two of their old ledgers and curios in the local Museum. But I'm not an antiquarian. My only point is that the past even of a soapboiler is none the worse for being the distant past. What's more, they knew in those days that objects are only of value when representative of subjects. Has it never occurred to you (no, I suppose not) that the Wisest's apes, ivory, and peacocks were symbolical? The apes representing, of course——"

“*Of course,*” I interrupted hurriedly. “But what I’m after, Maunders, is something faintly resembling matter-of-fact. These Lispet people—what is really their history? Subsequent, I mean, to the Apocrypha on which you have already drawn. Honestly, that pathetic old guy with the pouch of bast at the corner rather interested me.”

“‘Drawn on!’ he says,” drawled Maunders. “When I have not even distantly referred to Joseph’s Coat, or that she-devil Jezebel’s head-dress, or to the Grand Khan, or to the Princess Assinimova, or to the tanned Barbary kid cuir-ass of steel and emeralds in which Saladin met his end. A firm that, apart from clients celebrated in Holy Writ, once happily wrote off bad debts incurred with such customers as Semiramis, Sappho, Paris, and the Arch—or, as we amused moderns suppose, the exceedingly arch—Druids, might well boast—though it didn’t—not only of its repute but also of its catholicity.”

“No, no;” he mooned slowly about him. “Your precious old ‘matter-of-fact’! As if you

were a clerk in unholy orders, as if you bought your boots in Scotland Yard, as if you were a huckster of hardware. By all means you shall have the facts. But for heaven's sake—for heaven's sake, precocious K.,—be careful with them! A friend of mine (an earnest man) was once given a fact, and it exploded—in his bathroom.”

Dangling the last-of-the-Lispets little basket on my forefinger, I awaited the facts.

“The point is,” Maunders murmured on, “what of the slightest interest to you can there be to say of a firm that is now dust, and that followed a tradition which in these days would within six months clap its partners into Bedlam or the Bankruptcy Court? You must confess that that kind of sweet reasonableness, hardly less than the modern variety, is at last death to any decent humanity. At long last; maybe. And how divine a decay! Anyhow, there they were—and there, too, are the ruins of them, edging the smooth sloping crest of Adderley Hill, on the other side of the town. Henrietta shall take you there to-morrow, if you're a polite guest.

She loves to expatiate on that kind of rubble—the Failures.

“Still, try to imagine it, my dear K., in its green and early days. A long range of low buildings, part half-timbered Tudor, with a few wombed-in bits of 13th and 14th century, and a fringe of excellent 18th century—weathered and lovely moulded brick. In its prime it must have been a ravishing sight, with its hanging sign of faded blue and gold, its walls and thatch, and shingles, cobbled alleys and water-conduits, worn and mellow with the peace of a thousand thousand sunsets, the mosses and rain-stains and frost-flowerings of centuries of autumns and winters—just England’s history, moral and actual, in antique stone and gable and mullion.

“That ’s as it may be. I have no wish to exaggerate. There is no particular virtue in mere age—except to the imagination. Still, your mere facts are something, I suppose. The fact that they were spinning silk—here in England—before the Conqueror came over. The fact that they were world-renowned glovers

long before Elizabeth's time. The fact that their Egyptian cotton must have been abob on the Mediterranean when Lancashire, please God, was a verdant solitude, and *your* forefathers, my poor dear, were gadding about in woad.

“They had their foreign agents, of course, netting in handiwork from all over the globe, on which they themselves set the final seal. I won't labour the point. All I suggest is that you should ask a Bond Street dealer to supply you with a Persian rug of L. L. & V. workmanship. But avoid the First of April for the enterprise. And yet, do you know, there was really nothing at the root of them but—well, a kind of instinct: to keep themselves clean. Animals share it. That, and the pride with which a single virtue darkens and suffocates a man if he isn't for ever toiling to keep its growth under. The one secret of their stability, of their being, and, in times past, of their success, was simply this—that nothing they should, would, or could ever conceivably offer for sale need disturb for a breath of a sob or the weight of a dewdrop the ashes of their sleeping forefathers in Adderley Church-

yard. The like of which their forefathers had done by *their* forefathers.

“Why, if the ancient Hebrew Jews bequeath the very droop of their noses, why shouldn’t an old English ‘House’ bequeath its tradition? They believed—not Athanasian fashion but in their insides, so to speak—they believed in that perfect quality and consummate workmanship which, naturally, only exorbitant prices can assure. Exorbitant prices, mind you, not profits. They valued their fair fame. Only what was good enough for a Lispet could hope to satisfy a partner who spelt his name with two t’s, and only what satisfied a Lispett left unashamed the conscience of a Vaine.

“In plain Anglo-Saxon, the whole thing in decent practical moderation was merely the positive forecast of a Utopian dream. If ever you pass that way, rest for a moment at the mouth of the Well at the World’s End. And drink, pretty creature. Perhaps you will discover a cone supported by two doves scrawled on the bottom of its bronze bucket.

“At an extreme, of course, this tradition be-

came the very devil. I don't say they made any claim to be gentry, or that they refused any kind of exalted alliance if nicely and unostentatiously proffered. There's an old tale of one of their apprentices who went sightseeing in the 14th century. Among other little romantic adventures, he hunted the Unicorn, got a siren with child, fought a demon in Babylon, and bartered tiaras with the reigning Pope in Avignon—very much at that precise moment at a loose end.

“Still a tale's only a tale, though none the worse for that. You want naked facts—a most indecorous variety; and one of them is that during the nearer centuries the three families riotously intermarried, making the green one red, as the poet says. They were self-sufficient—like Leonardo. Except, of course, that they were artists only in the sense that they designed and distributed objects of flawless craftsmanship; while he was a consummate craftsman only by degree of his supreme art. And that was—or was not—between himself and the infinite, so to speak.”

“I love your ‘so-to-speaks’, Maunders.”

“It’s very nice of you,” said Maunders. “But what I really want to say is that gradually the ‘standing’ of the Firm lost everything in the nature of the precarious. Then, enter Beelzebub. Their only conceivable corruption could come from within, in one of two forms, putrefaction or petrification. Well, you shall see. In their earlier annals they can never so much as have tasted temptation to sink to trade devices. Progress, on the other hand, was practically denied to them. Their monopoly was the only one to be had for the asking—their integrity.

“I am not joking. Their wares were as innocent of guile and as beautiful as the lilies of the field. All they needed for mere prosperity was the *status quo*. Does Nature? The high and mighty sought them out for precisely the same reason as a young man with imagination pursues that Will-o’-the-Wisp called Beauty. Have you never noticed how different a respect one has for an *advertised* article and for an article whose virtues have been sweetly absorbed into one’s soul?

“Compare, for instance, a cottage loaf with *foie gras*; or the Mr. Anon of the Scottish Ballads with Sappho; or Lord Loveaduck’s ‘brilliance’ with Gamma in Leo. Lispet, Lispett & Vaine would have as gladly catalogued their goods as have asked for references. Advertise! Why, a lady might as well advertise her great-grandmother’s wig. They were merchants of the one true tradition. Their profits were fees. Their arrogance was beyond the imagination of a Tamburlaine, and their—what shall we call them?—their *principles* were as perennial as the secret springs of the Oceans. It was on similar principles that Satan sold the fruit to Mother Eve.”

“I see,” said I. “If one *can*, Maunders—through a haze of contradictions.”

“You cannot see,” said Maunders. “But that is simply because your modern mind is vitiated by the conviction that you just *pay* a tradesman to sell you a decent article, that you can with money buy quality. You can’t. L. L. & V. merely graciously *bestowed* on their customers the excellence of their wares, of their ‘goods’

in the true old meaning of the term—a peculiar something in the style and finish which only the assurance of their history and their intentions—their ideals, if you like—made possible.

“Good heavens, man, isn’t there a kind of divination between one’s very soul and a thing decently made—whether it’s a granite Rameses, or a Chelsea porringer? The mere look of a scarf or a snippet of damask or of lawn or of velvet, a stomacher or a glove of L. L. & V. make, is like seeing for the first time a bush of blowing hawthorn or a nymph in a dell of woodruff, when, say, you are nine. Or, for the last, when you are nine and ninety.”

“My dear Maunders,” I smiled benignly. “What on earth are you talking about? I have always supposed that speech was intended to disclose one’s meaning. Nymphs!”

“Well,” replied Maunders, imperturbably shoving his ‘Sheffield’ candlestick at last into his slate-coloured great-coat pocket; “I merely mean that there is a kind of goodness in good work. It confers a sort of everlasting youth. Think of the really swagger old boys we call the

masters. What do you actually get out of them? The power to be momentarily immortal, that's all. But that's beside the point. What I wanted to tell you about—and you are a poor receptacle—is, of course, the firm's inevitable degradation. I have kept you pining too long. First they petrified, and then the stone began to rot away. The process must of course have been very gradual. It was Anthony Lispett who at the same time finished it off, and who yet—at least according to *my* notion of the thing, though Henrietta does not agree—and who yet redeemed the complete contraption.

“He must have come into the Firm when he was a comparative youngster, say nineteen, towards the end of the 18th century. Needless to say, not a single one of the partners, not at least to my knowledge, ever went to a university or any fallalery of that kind. They held aloof from alien ideals. Their ‘culture’ was in their history and in their blood; and not a Methuselah's lifetime could exhaust even a fraction of that. They had no ambitions; did not mix; kept to themselves. Their ladies made

their own county society—sparrowhawk-nosed, sloping-shouldered, high-boned, fair-haired beauties for the most part. It was an honour to know them; to be known by them; a privilege—and one arrogantly reserved—to be among their ‘customers’. They were Lispet, Lispett & Vaine.

“Well, this Anthony seems to have been something of an exotic leaven. From the beginning, he was two-thirds himself, *plus*, if you like, three-thirds of a Lispett. There is a portrait of him in his youth—an efflorescent Georgian dandy, whiskers, *hauteur*, eyebrows all complete; a kind of antique Beau Brummel. No doubt the old boys squinted askew at him out of their spectacles, no doubt they nodded at each other about him over their port. No doubt their good ladies pursed their mouths at him over their teacups.

“But they could no more resist the insidious growth of the creature than Jack’s mother could have held down the sprouting beanstalk. He was clearly the fruit of breeding-in, and of a kind of passive vaingloriousness, as

you will see when Henrietta exhibits the Family Tree.

“Old John Vaine Lispet Lispett had married his first cousin, Jemima Lispett, and Anthony, it seems, was their only child. There is a story that old John himself in his youth had—well, gossip is merely gossip, and gossamer’s merely gossamer, however prolific it may be. And, whether or not, there is no doubt that Anthony in his boyhood had made an attempt to run away. They picked him up seven miles from the coast—half-starved and practically shoeless. He must have been off to Tyre or Damascus, or something of that kind. One knows how one’s worm may turn.

“Poor child—just that one whiff of freedom, and he was back once more, glueing his nose, beating his fledgling plumes, against an upper window of the house on the hill. The whole thing, top to bottom, was a kind of slavery, of course. The Firm had its own Factory Laws.

“No ‘hand,’ for example, was allowed to wear, at least within sight of those windows, any fabric not of the firm’s weaving. No hand

ever came into direct contact with one of the partners. There was a kind of hereditary overseer—a family of the name of Watts. Every hand, again, was strictly forbidden to starve. If he or she misbecame himself or herself, instant dismissal followed; and a generous pension.

“So drastic was the relation between the valley-village and the hill that, for upwards of two hundred and fifty years, only one hand *had* so misbecome herself. She had smiled a little smile one Spring morning out of her little bottle-glass casement above her loom at the then middle-aged Vaine; and she drew her pension for six months! They say she drowned herself in the Marshes. It is as if you went and hanged yourself for having too short a nose.”

“I cannot see the analogy,” said I.

“No,” said Maunders, “but your Maker would—the Jehovah that blessed the race of the vulture that sold me this old replica of a candlestick. Can’t you understand that her smile was a natural thing (just out of herself), and that he was a kind of sacrosanct old Pharaoh? The

discipline was abominable according to sentimental modern notions. But then, the perquisites were pretty generous.

“The long and the short of it was that every single one of the firm’s employees was happy. They were happy in the only sense one *can* be truly happy—in service. Corruptions have swarmed in now, but in the old days the village in the valley must have been as beautiful as a picture of this green old world hung up in the fore-court of Paradise.

“It had houses contemporary with every wing of the Works on the hilltop. Its wages were for the most part the only decent wages one can accept. They were in *kind*. What, I ask you, in the sight of heaven is the fittest payment to John Keats for a sonnet—a Thousand Guineas or a plume of your little Elizabeth’s golden fuzz?

“I don’t want to sentimentalize. J. K. had to live, I suppose (though why, we may be at loggerheads to explain). But what is porridge without cream, and what is cream if you loathe the cow? I ask you, my dear K., is not a living

wage simply one that will keep the *kind* of life it represents fully alive?

“Give them the credit, then. L. L. & V. kept their hands positively blossoming with life. I don’t mean they theorized. Marx is merely the boiled - up sediment of a civilization gone wrong. They weren’t philanthropist. Nor am I, please heaven. The quality of the L. L. & V. merchandise ensured quality in their hands. Where we walk now—this macadamized road—was once a wood of birches and bluebells. Can you even imagine its former phantom denizens to have been knocked-kneed or under-hung?”

“Perhaps not,” said I, “but are you intending to imply that the ‘phantom denizens,’ as you call them, manufacture the bluebells?”

Maunder made an indescribably guttural noise in his throat.

“What I am saying,” he replied, “is that the village was as lovely a thing to see and live and laugh and love and dream in as were the bodies of the human beings that occupied it. *Their* stock, too, had climbed from grace to grace. They enjoyed a recognizable type of beauty.

The girls were as fair-skinned as a plucking of apricots, with hair of a spidery fine silkiness, and eyes worthy of their veiling. Just Nature's mimicry, I suppose; like an Amazonian butterfly, or the praying mantis or—or the stick caterpillar.

“I can see them—and so could you, if you had the eyes—I can see them dancing in the first of early moonlight, or bathing in what, prior to the human spawning of tin cans and old boots, was a stream crystal as Pharpar. I can see them sallying out and returning, chattering to and fro in the morning dews and the greying twilight. No set hours; only a day as long or as short as love of its task could make it. What indeed is breeding, my dear K., but the showing forth of a perfectly apt and peculiar excellency? Just fitness for its job. Puma, pelican, Patagonian papalja, pretty Poll.”

“What is a papalja, Maunders?” I inquired.

“I don't know,” said Maunders. “But imagine them—with whatever effort is necessary—ascending and descending that hill-side through their Fruit Walk! It is about the nearest approach

to any earthly vision I can achieve of Jacob's ladder. Give even your abominable old London a predominant L. L. & V.—well, then but not till then, you may invite me to the Mansion House for its annual November 9th. But there, I'm not an iconoclast."

"I wish Maunders," said I, "you would at your leisure re-read *Unto This Last*; and that you would first make the ghost of an attempt to tell a decent story. What was the Fruit Walk?"

The Town's puddley, petrol-perfumed, out-lying streets were still busy with pedestrians—nurses and perambulators, children in woollen gaiters, and young ladies with red hair. It was, therefore, almost as difficult to keep abreast with Maunders as it was to follow his obscure meanderings.

"Oh, the Fruit Walk," he muttered, staring vacantly through a dairyman's window at an earthenware green-and-grey pelican with a fish in its bill. "The Fruit Walk was merely the cherries and quinces and crab-apples and damsons that had been planted in rosy, snowy,

interlacing, discontinuous quincunx fashion; half circling and straggling over and down the green mounting and mounded hill to the very edge of the quarry. Not a miserable avenue, of course, but a kind of to-and-fro circuitous chace between village and Works. Once, your eyes might actually have seen that divine chimneyed cluster, tranquil as an image in water, on the dark emerald hill-top in the dying, gaudy sunset. And, shelving down, that walk in bloom! One might almost assume that L. L. & V. weather habitually haunted the scene. Things do react on one another, you know; and Nature wears 14th century sleeves."

"Oh, for pity's sake, Maunders, let's get back to Anthony. What about Anthony?"

Maunders, softly striding along like an elephant in his flat square-toed shoes, appeared to be pondering.

"Well," he began slowly, "the 'what-about' of Anthony covers a rather wide field. I fancy, do you know, there was a tinge of Traherne in his composition. The beau was only the chrysalis stage. Of course, it was Blake's era. I fancy

Anthony sowed pretty early his wild oats. There are many varieties, and his were mainly of the mind.

“He was not, I venture to add, to make things *quite* clear to you, either a marrying or an un-marrying man. And, of course, like all instinctive creatures with a never-waning fountain of life in them, he shed. Some of us shed feathers, some fur, some innocence, some principles, and all shed skin — the seven years’ Spring-cleaning, you know, that leaves the house in the flooding May-day sunlight a little bit dingier than it was before.

“Well, Anthony seems to have shed what one mistakes for artificialities. He shed his ringlets, his foppish clothes, his pretences of languor, his dreamy superiority. He shed his tacit acceptance of the firm’s renown, and so discovered his own imagination. Only in the ‘tip-toppers’ do intellect and imagination lie down together, as will the lion and the lamb.

“Then, of course, he seems gradually or suddenly to have shed the L. L. & V. pride and arrogance. He must have begun to think. All these

centuries, please remember, the firm had been gradually realising why, actually *why*, their stuff was super-excellent in the eyes of humanity. And that—Oh, I don't know; but to realise that, perhaps, is to discount its merits elsewhere. Anthony, on the other hand, had come to realise, in his own queer vague fashion, that one's only salvation is to set such eyes squinting. And yet, not of set and deliberate purpose. He was not a wit. Art, my dear, dear K., whatever you may like to say, *is* useless; unless one has the gumption to dissociate use from materialism."

"I was not aware," said I, "that I had said anything. You mean, I suppose, that a man has only to realise that his work is excellent for it to begin to lose its virtue. Like beauty, Maunders, and the rouge-pot and powder-puff? Still, I prefer Anthony to trade ethics. What did the rest of them do?"

"What I was about to tell you," replied Maunders mildly, "is, that Anthony had bats in his belfry. Not the vampire variety; just *extra-terrestrial* bats. He was 'queer.' Perhaps more

in him than in most of us had come from elsewhere. And the older he grew the more the hook-winged creatures multiplied. No doubt the firm would have edged him out if it had been practicable. No doubt the young hedge-sparrows would edge out the squab-cuckoo, if that were manageable. But it was not. Anthony was double-dyed, a Lispett with two t's, and it would have been *lèse majesté*, domestic high-treason to acknowledge to the world at large that he was even eccentric.

“Well, there he was, a smallish man, with short-growing hair, a little like Thothmes II, to judge from his portrait—a man of extraordinary gifts in his craft, of an exquisite sensibility to quality and design, but seldom, I imagine, at the Board Meetings. Often, it seems, he used to ramble off into the country. He appears to have especially hated a sort of Frenchness that had crept into the firm's wares. But much worse than mooning about to soak in Englishness again, he would ramble off into the country of his *mind*, and there you need to have a faint notion of where you are before you

can safely go any further. It's difficult, of course, to know exactly what his broodings were. But the story goes that he would complete his nocturnal pilgrimages by climbing up before daybreak into one of the fruit-trees on the hill, a magnificent mulberry—to see the Sun, I suppose; to 'look down' as far as possible on the Works; to be up among the morning birds, like the old man in the limerick."

"An odd bat, that," I interposed.

"There he would squat," continued Maunders imperturbably, "poor old creature, peering out of the leaves, the rose of dawn on his face, as when it lightened Blake's. And presently, the angels up from the valley would pass by, singing and laughing, to their work. A pretty sight it must have been, with their young faces and pure colours and nimble practised gestures. For, mind you, it was still a happiness to be one of the hands in the firm—as compared, at any rate, with being a grimy paw elsewhere. Only at long last would *they* become aware of the glowing gloom in the heads. Not merely were the brains of the firm tending in

one direction and the members remaining more or less static in another, but things outside were beginning to change. The god of machinery was soon to spout smoke and steam from his dismal nostrils, and man to learn the bright little lesson that not only necessities, but even luxuries, can be the cheaper if they are manufactured a gross at a time."

"Yes," said I; "there he would squat; and then?"

"Then," breathed Maunders, "one morning, one shafted scarlet morning, it seems he saw—well, I cannot say what exactly he did see. No hand anyhow, but a light-embodied dream. A being lovelier than any goddess for whom even an L. L. & V. in the service of the Sorceress of Sidon could have been moved from bowels of superstitious horror to design sandals. A shape, a fleetingness, a visitant—poor old Bat-in-the-Belfry—evoked by a moment's aspiration and delight out of his own sublime wool-gatherings. And so this ageing creature, this extra-Lispetted old day-dreamer, fell in love—with a non-entity."

“My dear Maunders; pause,” I said. “In mere self-respect! How could such an occurrence as that have been recorded in the firm’s annals? No; no.”

“Wern’t there letters?” sighed Maunders, turning suddenly on me, malacca cane in air. “Wasn’t there a cracked-brained diary? Haven’t you a vestige of old-fashioned and discredited gumption? Wait till I have finished, and let your sweet-smelling facts have a show. Ask Henrietta. I say,” he repeated stubbornly, “that between the dawn and the daytime, down out of his broad foliage, the hill-side in indescribable bloom, this old meandering Query, this half-demented old Jack-o’-Dreams saw a Vision, and his heart went the same way as long since had gone his head. Haven’t I told you he was what the dear old evolutionists, blind to the inexhaustible graces of creation, esteem a *Sport?*”

“The Family Tree had blossomed out of season, for the last time, jetting its dwindling virtue into this final, queer, anomalous bloom; rich with nectarous bane. It had returned upon

itself. 'Tis the last rose of Summer that sighs of the Spring. 'Ah, yes, but did the vision see *him?*'—you are sneering to yourself.

“And to that I reply: I don't know. Do they ever? Or is it that only certain long-suffering eyes can afford them the hospitality of becoming visible? Anyhow, *I* see her. And in a fashion that is not only the bliss but the very deuce of solitude. Ignore its bidding, K., and we are damned. Oh yes, I know. The inward eye is all very well. I know it. But to share that experience with these outward groping orbs I'd—well, I'd gladly go bankrupt. Ask Henrietta.”

“What happened then?”

“This happened. The wool-gathering wits flocked back and golden-fleeced him. One might almost say he became equally astute and extravagant. As a matter of fact, of course, only willing and selfless service can bring every human faculty to bear.” Maunders sighed. “He sent a cheque for a thousand guineas or so to a Dutch bulb-farm, and planted the hill-walk with tulips, April-blue scyllas and *narcissi poetici*. *Narcissi poetici!* He tapped an earth-

bound spring and set up fauns and dryads, amorette and what not, spouting subterranean water. He built a shrine of alabaster—with an empty niche.

“It appeared to be mere scatter-brained fooling. Still, it was in a sense in the L. L. & V. tradition, and his partners appear to have let him have a free hand. Don’t forget their even then almost illimitable resources. They’d far rather—even the strict-whiskered Vaine of the period, who in unhappier circumstances might have sat for the typical alderman—they’d infinitely rather he exhibited his peculiarities within their sphere, so to speak, than bring them to mockery before the world at large.”

“I see.”

“They hadn’t till then perhaps baldly recognised the world at large, except as a hot-bed of prehistoric or sycophantic customers. And they never—not for an instant—even surmised his depredations would prove active from *within*. None the less, like some secret serpent, spawn of the forgotten fabulous, he was in fact gnawing at the very vitals of the tradition. Let

me put it bluntly, in terms which even you, my dear K., will appreciate. Anthony Lispett had 'gone balmy' on his Vision. She—and therefore he—was 'beside *himself*'.

"I do not suggest that he mixed her up with his superannuating old *corpus vile*; nothing vulgar to talk of, and tragic to think of, in that sort. He merely lived on from that daybreak dream to dream with but one desire in his poor cracked old cranium—to serve her Idea. Aren't we, all of us, myth-makers? Grins not the Lion at the Unicorn? Does not the soapboiler bedizen our streets with Art—and 'Atmosphere'? Anthony's myth was from elsewhere—neither from his stomach, his pocket, his reputation, his utilitarian morals, nor his brains. That was all. And as he served her, I suppose, he found himself cherubically treading yet more secretly and inwardly her Hesperidean meads."

I glanced at Maunders in some dismay. "How?"

"Well," said he, "it is not easy to divine how exactly Anthony began his malpractices. But clearly, since he was perpetually haunted

by this illusion of a divine, unearthly stranger, a sort of Athene haunting his hill, his one desire could not but be to set the Works working for *her*. He could bide his time. He could be quiet and gradual. Anyhow, we know the event, though we can't say precisely how it evolved.

“One may assume, I suppose, that he would steal to and fro among the nocturnal looms and presses and vats and dyeing rooms, and, ten times more richly gifted by his insane inspiration than he was even by nature, that he just doctored right and left. He would experiment night after night with the firm's materials in the raw. Worse, he rationed himself in his tree-gazing; and climbed to his leafy perch only during certain conjunctions of the planets. Mere circumstances seem to have waited on him, as did the sun on Joshua.

“But the Lispet and the Vaine of this time were nothing but hidebound old bachelors—intent only on saving the face of convention. The last Double-T died the day after the site of the shrine was decided on. There was no young

blood in the firm. And with an almost diabolical ingenuity Anthony seems to have executed only the orders of such clients as wanted the firm's very finest and rarest handiwork. Even those, of course, who coveted or could afford only the commoner materials were already beginning to dwindle in numbers.

The other customers he kept waiting, or insulted with questions, or supplied with more delicate and exquisite fabrics than they required.

"The story goes that a certain Empress renowned for her domestic virtues commanded a trousseau for yet another royal niece or what not. A day or two before the young woman's nuptials, and weeks late, arrived silks and tissues and filigrees spun out of some kind of South American and Borneo spider silk, such as only a nymph could wear. My dear K., it nearly hatched a European War. That particular Court was little but a menagerie of satyrs.

"Countesses and such-like soliciting 'fives' and 'fours' in gloves, and 'ones' in stockings, might still faintly hope to be accommodated;

and even then their coveted wares were a tight fit. For a while the firm seems to have survived on the proceeds from merchandise intended for grown-ups which your cosmopolitan Cræsus snapped up for their children. At second-hand, of course, since few of them could extort a 'reference' to the firm for love or even for money.

“Henrietta has a few bits of embroideries and silk of the time. Perhaps she will show them to you. Even a human craft can reflect a divine disaster. And the linens!—of a quality that would derange the ghost of an Egyptian embalmer.

“Even worse, Anthony seems to have indulged an extraordinary sense of propriety. He would lavish L. L. & V. urbanities on some sylph of an actress who had no more morals in the usual acceptation of the term than a humming bird, and flatly returned fabulous cheques (with the order) to old protégés of the firm merely convicted of fortune-making, or of organised 'philanthropy', or of 'bettering the conditions' of their fellow creatures. He seems

to have hated the virtuous for their own sake alone.

“In short, he grew madder and madder, and the custom, the good-will, even the reputation of the firm melted like butter in the sun. The last Lispet followed the last Double-T—expired of apoplexy in the counting-house, and was sat on by the coroner. The reigning Vaine turned religious and was buried in a sarcophagus of Portland stone under the foundations of the Unitarian Chapel which he himself had laid in the hope perhaps to lay the L. L. & V. devil at the same time.

“The hands dwindled, died out, dropped away, or even emigrated to the paws. Only a few with some little competence and an impulsive fund of gratitude and courtesy worked on for a master of whom, because they loved him, they asked the paltriest wages. The Fruit Walk mutined into a thicket; the fountains choked themselves with sighings and greened with moss; the tulips found a quieter Nirvana in mere leaf. And Anthony made at last no pretence even of patronising the final perishing flower of the firm’s old clientele.

“He trafficked in a kind of ludicrous dolls’ merchandize—utterly beautiful little infinitesimals in fabrics worth a hundred times their weight in rubies. So ridiculous a scandal had the ‘business’ at last become that when its few scoffing creditors for old sake’s sake sold it up, not a single bid was made for the property. It is in ruins now. Consult Ezekiel. Or Henrietta.

“I have no wish to sentimentalize; I am not a cynic or a philosopher. Yet I slide my eyes back to that narrow hilled-in strip of sea-coast whence once rose walled Tyre and Sidon, Arvad and Jebail, and—well, I merely remind myself that the Rosetta Stone is but a hornbook of the day before yesterday’s children of men. Things *do* as a matter of fact seem to rot of their own virtue—inverted, so to speak. It’s not likely to occur again. I mean, not for some time. The Town was almost apologetic. Democracy rarely runs to extremes—unless one may so describe the guillotine. But I am no politician. Enough of that. Even transatlantic visitors are now rare.”

Maunder and I were standing together by

this time under the laurels and bay-trees, not of his own planting, besides his garden railings; he with his bulging, pale-blue eyes—and his sham candlestick branching out of his pocket; and I—well, irritated beyond endurance.

“Good heavens, Maunders,” I exclaimed, “the stuff you talk! But one would not mind that so much if you could spin a decent yarn. You haven’t even told me what became of the Belfry. Was he *nothing* but bats at last?”

“Old Anthony?” he murmured softly. “Why, there is nothing in that. He lived on—for years—in the Works. You could see his burning candle from the valley, even on nights of full moon. And, of course, some gay imbecile set the story about that the whole lovely abandoned derelict place was haunted. Twangling strings and vanishing faces, and a musing shape at a remoter window, her eyes reflecting a scene which only an imagination absolutely denuded of commonsense could hope or desire to share with her. After all, one does ignore the ghost until it is well out of the body. Ask Henrietta.”

“But Maunders,” I called after him.

Too late: his shapeless slouching slate-grey body with its indescribable hat and malacca cane had vanished among the “evergreens”, and the only answer I received was the dwindling rumour of my own expostulatory voice among their leaves—“Maunders . . .”

Strange to say, it was in this moment of helplessness that I discovered that my little bast basket was gone. When? How? For an instant I hesitated—in pure cowardice. It was a quarter past one, and Mrs. Maunders, a charming and active hostess, if a little of a martinet, disapproved of unpunctual guests. But only for an instant. The thought of Bettie’s fair glad little face decided me; and I set out to retrace my footsteps in search of the lost plaything. Alas, in vain.



Lispet, Lispett and Vaine.—By Walter de la Mare



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